

# Energy and Planning White Papers

The government has published its vision for the future of the planning system and energy supply in two new White Papers. These policies could have a big impact on the countryside we all know and love to walk in.

**What is a White Paper? It sounds very complicated to me.** White Papers are statements of government policy that usually become the basis for a parliamentary bill, which in turn will be passed into law. White Papers set out government's vision and ideas on a certain issue and ask for responses from interested parties. In May 2007, two White Papers were published on energy and the planning system.

**Why is the Ramblers' Association interested in energy and planning policies?** One of our charitable aims is to 'protect and enhance the beauty of the countryside'. The planning system has been used for the past 60 years to carefully control building and development within and outside of towns and cities. Energy production often requires the construction of large industrial power stations - whether these are wind farms or nuclear plants - which can have a negative impact on the surrounding landscapes. The Ramblers' Association accepts that sustainable development helps to promote improvements to society and the economy, and can help to improve the wider natural environment.

**So what exactly is the government proposing?** The Energy White Paper gives the green light to private companies who want to build new nuclear power stations, and encourages investment in different forms of renewable energy. It argues that this is necessary to meet increasing demand for energy, and to help tackle climate change. The Planning White Paper outlines how the government will produce new 'National Policy Statements' which describe the need for new 'Major Infrastructure Projects' - including power stations, roads, waste incinerators and



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airports. A new independent commission will then decide on whether to grant permission for such proposals. Government ministers currently hold this power. There will also be changes to the local 'town and country' planning system to speed up small household developments like loft extensions and conservatories.

**Should we be concerned?** We are very worried that the planning reforms will lead to the spread of roads and airports, which damage the walking experience and increase greenhouse gases. It could become easier for companies to build large out-of-town supermarkets and major housing developments. This contradicts other stated government policies about promoting walking-friendly developments and regenerating town centres. There will be fewer formal opportunities for local people to have a say on whether 'major infrastructure projects' should be sited in their area. There is also a danger that landscape protection in remote areas will be weakened in a rush to construct new power stations of all shapes and sizes. It seems as if the policy emphasis is shifting away from a concept of all-round sustainable development to one that simply promotes economic and industrial growth.

**Is there anything to welcome in these policies?** It will become easier for individuals to install microgeneration renewable energy - such as small wind turbines and solar panels - on their homes without complicated planning procedures. The government has agreed to reform the Renewables Obligation, which the RA has demanded as a way to promote alternatives to very large on-shore wind farms. Government has also said it wants to protect existing Green Belt land.

**When will these reforms happen?** The government aims to implement its proposals by 2009. Powers over planning and energy policy that are devolved to Scotland and Wales will not be affected.

**So what can I do?** Keep up to date with the latest developments at [www.ramblers.org.uk/countryside](http://www.ramblers.org.uk/countryside). The Ramblers is part of a coalition of environmental groups campaigning to protect the right to be heard and prevent the spread of damaging major infrastructure projects into the countryside - visit [www.planningdisaster.co.uk](http://www.planningdisaster.co.uk) for more. If you don't have access to the internet, you can call or write to the Countryside Protection team at central office.